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The Honorable Mike Johanns
Secretary of Agriculture
200-A Jamie L. Whitten Building
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

On August 30, you announced USDA's guiding principles for development of a public/private partnership for maintaining animal movement tracking data as part of the national animal identification system. I have consistently conveyed my support for the establishment of a national animal identification system and in fact have urged that it be implemented at a more reasonable pace. But this recent announcement about entrusting to wholly private organizations and entities the crucial responsibility for maintaining animal movement information strays from USDA's stance just months ago.

Until recently, USDA had given every indication that it would maintain and control animal movement information. In April, as part of fiscal year 2006 agriculture appropriations hearings, I submitted questions to Under Secretary Hawks because it was unclear exactly with whom or where animal identification information would be kept as it is submitted by producers from across the United States. In response, Under Secretary Hawks stated that both the national premises information repository and the animal records repository would be maintained by APHIS at the Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health facility in Fort Collins, Colorado. USDA's strategic plan designates the animal records repository as the entity responsible for holding animal movement tracking data. Mr. Hawks went on to state this data would be later housed at the National Technology Information Center in Kansas City, Missouri. On August 30, however, you announced that the animal movement tracking database (i.e. the animal records repository) would instead be privately held and operated. I ask that USDA justify in detail why it reversed course from USDA itself maintaining the animal movement tracking database to now entrusting private entities with performing this function.

It seems logical to have certain components of the national animal identification system managed by private entities given the diversity of the livestock industry and special needs of each animal species. It is extremely important, however, that the involvement of private companies or organizations not jeopardize the security and confidentiality of producer data. It is very unclear how this is possible under the private system you have announced. There must be firewalls and protections as to how data may be used or distributed by private systems to ensure that producer animal identification information is not improperly shared or sold by private entities.

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Unfortunately, now that USDA has removed itself from administering and providing oversight of animal movement tracking information, it appears there will be no certainty that data will be secure. Essentially, no one will be held accountable for improper use or distribution of data in the system. I ask that USDA provide me with the specific criteria and firewalls it will require of the private entity or entities responsible for maintaining the animal tracking repository to ensure data is not improperly distributed or sold to other entities.

Producers have rightfully expressed concern to me that they do not know what cost burdens the national animal identification system will place on them. Producers have also expressed concern that a private animal movement tracking database could make the animal identification system even more costly for their operations since the federal government would not be covering the cost of this portion of the system. To complicate this matter, USDA has not provided an analysis of the economic impact a national animal identification system will have on producers throughout the industry, particularly whether there are cost differences between the initial plan for a USDA system and the recent choice of a privately operated system. Without this analysis it is impossible to compare costs and to determine costs to producers. Producers are expected to bear significant costs of the system, yet are being left completely in the dark. USDA must provide separate estimates of the costs of a national animal identification system to producers and stakeholders throughout the industry for an animal movement tracking system operated by USDA versus one operated by a private entity.

USDA will be holding a public meeting on October 12 in Kansas City, Missouri to clarify how the private system should operate and, most importantly, to formulate a new entity representing all affected industry sectors that will oversee the privately run national animal movement tracking database. I urge that USDA hold multiple meetings on this topic to ensure that all stakeholders and members of the public are able to participate and express to USDA their concerns and expectations regarding the national animal movement tracking database. Producers have very important practical experience and perspectives to contribute. The greater role producers have in the development of the national animal identification system, the more likely they will participate in the system as a voluntary initiative and allow a smoother transition when it becomes mandatory.

The concerns and issues I raise make it clear that there is much work to be done before the national animal identification system is ready to be fully operational. I would appreciate your immediate attention to my concerns and look forward to your response.

Sincerely yours,



Tom Harkin
Ranking Democratic Member